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## The Intangible Lightness of Heritage

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**Abstract:** Although my own fieldwork site in Japan is far from Tohoku, where the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in 2011, my research in a small rural community helped me to place the narratives of survivors into a context I could better understand. Against this backdrop, I consider the role of certain forms of “heritage,” such as local festivals and rituals, in the aftermath of disaster, suggesting that the infrastructure created for the practice of traditional activities during normal times can, in times of trauma, become a template for more urgent forms of organization – such as setting up shelters. Moreover, the fact that many communities persist in performing festivals and rituals soon after disaster suggests that the very practice of such traditions, even when the context has changed, has symbolic and practical value. Ultimately, however, for heritage to work under these circumstances communities must maintain flexibility and a “light” approach.

**Zusammenfassung:** Obwohl mein japanisches Feldforschungsgebiet weit von Tohoku, dem Ort des katastrophalen Erdbebens und Tsunamis im Jahr 2011, entfernt ist, hat mir meine Forschung in einer kleinen ländlichen Gemeinde Japans dennoch geholfen die Überlebensgeschichten der Opfer besser einzuordnen und zu verstehen. Ich nehme deshalb meine Feldforschungserfahrung als Grundlage, um mich mit der Rolle von bestimmten Überlieferungen und Bräuchen in der Bewältigung von Katastrophen auseinanderzusetzen. Meiner Meinung nach kann eine bestehende Infrastruktur für Rituale und traditionelle Aktivitäten einen Rahmen bieten, der in der Zeit nach Katastrophen und traumatischen Erlebnissen für die Mobilisation und Organisation von Einheimischen genutzt werden kann, um Nothilfe und Wiederaufbauhilfe zu leisten. Die Tatsache, dass viele Gemeinden häufig trotz tragischer Ereignisse an ihren Feiern und Rituale festhalten, zeigt ihre hohe symbolische und praktische Wertschätzung. Damit Feiern und Rituale auch unter widrigen Umständen ihre volle Wirkung entfalten können, sollten sie mit viel Flexibilität und Kreativität durchgeführt werden.

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I am neither a survivor nor an ethnographer of disaster. My observations are distant, and filtered primarily through mass media and secondhand accounts. But in this essay, I begin with a brief personal narrative from my own fieldwork in Japan that has allowed me to imagine, ever so slightly, something about the ways people and communities can cope with the immeasurable sadness and irreversible changes that disaster and trauma can bring.

For over a decade now, I have pursued fieldwork on a small island located off the southwest coast of Kyushu. This is about as far away as you can get from the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and continuing nuclear catastrophe in the northeast of the main island of Honshu. Yet, somehow, in an indirect but poignant way, my relationship with people in that community far from the disaster site gave me a way to think about the events of March 11, 2011 – or simply “3.11” as it is often called in Japan. It is, of course, impossible for me to think from a survivor’s perspective, or even begin to identify with the experiences or feelings of people who have lived through these events. But by listening – even from a distance – and placing those narratives in a more familiar context, perhaps we can begin to make connections, and participate in a dialogue about how to make sense of the senseless. For me, it was by contemplating my own experience of a “failed” ethnography against the unfolding of the devastation in Tohoku that I learned something about the meaning of tradition and how it can help individuals and groups persist in the face of otherwise unbearable loss. Perhaps too it is appropriate to begin with this personal narrative as a way of entering into the larger issues that disaster and trauma raise, because so often it is the act of storytelling that makes it possible to imagine distant events and the emotions of others.

My own research focuses on what, in recent years, has come to be termed “intangible cultural heritage,” an awkward and bureaucratic phrase to be sure, but one that encompasses a wide range of expressive cultural forms, including festivals and rituals and other types of events. In order to deepen my own understanding of one such form, I have tried to spend as much time as possible in the community in which it takes place, something not easily done if that community happens to be in Japan and you live in the United States. While we often talk of ethnography in terms of immersion in a culture different from the one in which we spend our daily lives, sometimes such immersion can be difficult, and fieldwork must be snatched in small bits and quick forays, like gathering up crumbs with the hope of assembling the flavor of the whole.

Fortunately, the particular form of intangible cultural heritage I have been studying is a ritual that takes place on New Year’s Eve, which means I am on winter break from my job teaching at a university and I can – if funding permits – travel to Japan for a few days. Such spotty visitation is far from perfect, but since I have worked in this particular site for so long now, even a few days of research

can prove fruitful. After each little foray of this sort I come away with a slightly deeper understanding of the ritual and the people who participate in it. Every visit is a discovery.

The ritual is formally known as *Koshikijima no Toshidon*, and more casually called *Toshidon*.<sup>1</sup> It revolves around what Japanese folklorists often refer to as *raiōshin* or “visiting deities,” in which a community is visited once a year by frightening demon-deity figures from another world. In the case of *Toshidon*, the deities (who are also called *Toshidon*) descend from the “skyworld” on New Year’s Eve. In practice, these *Toshidon* are community members, usually young men, who put on gigantic colorful masks made of painted cardboard and dress in costumes assembled from straw and the fronds of local plants. In groups of five or six they go from house to house where they inquisition children, scolding them for bad behavior and praising them for their accomplishments throughout the preceding year. To the children, of course, these demonic figures are frightening; the experience is a test of bravery, often faced with tears and trembling voices, and just as often boasted about with family and friends the next day. The *Toshidon* only spend about twenty minutes in each household, but for the children it is a rite of passage they will always remember.

I am simplifying this of course, because *Toshidon* actually takes place simultaneously in several different neighborhoods and each has its own set of procedures and protocols. Like any tradition, *Toshidon* has a long and complex history and it changes incrementally from year to year depending on the participants and the needs of the moment – one reason I have tried to return as often as possible. I should also mention that in 2009 *Toshidon* was added to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This was big news in the community and caused residents to deeply consider the broader theoretical questions of just what “intangible cultural heritage” means.<sup>2</sup>

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1 “Koshikijima no Toshidon” literally means “*Toshidon* of the Koshiki Islands” and is the name under which the ritual was recorded as an “Important intangible folk cultural property” [*jūyō mukei minzoku bunkazai*] with the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1977. This is also the name as it was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. On the island, however, the ritual is generally known as simply *Toshidon*.

2 There are a number of rituals similar to *Toshidon* practiced elsewhere in Japan; nor is *Toshidon* unlike mumming and other practices in various cultures throughout the world. My description here is based primarily on *Toshidon* in the communities of Motomachi and Fumoto. For more on *Toshidon* and UNESCO, see Foster 2011; 2013; 2015. I have been researching *Toshidon* since 1999 and have observed the ritual in 1999, 2000, 2009, 2011, and 2012; I have also conducted fieldwork on Shimo-Koshikijima at other times of the year and lived full time on the island from December 2011–May 2012. I want to express my endless gratitude to my many friends on the island who have welcomed me warmly into their community and generously shared with me their thoughts on *Toshidon* – and so much more.

Beyond this, the details of Toshidon are not critical to my essay, but I do want to stress the location: the island of Shimo-Koshikijima has approximately 1700 households and is located twenty-five miles off the west coast of Kagoshima Prefecture in southwestern Japan. Not surprisingly, it is somewhat difficult to get to – especially when you are coming from the United States. And this is where my own narrative begins.

## The Best Laid Plans

In 2010, both my partner and I were teaching at Indiana University. In the fall, we devised a brilliant plan for winter break that would allow us to meet various family responsibilities (mine in California, hers in Japan) and also give me a chance to visit Shimo-Koshikijima for Toshidon. Taking into account some time for intensive grading, our schedule had us arriving in Japan on December 26. I would stay for a few day's with my in-laws at their home near Yokohama and then travel by train to Satumasendai in Kagoshima Prefecture, where I would spend one night and then take a ferry to Shimo-Koshikijima on the afternoon of the 30th. Even if something went awry and I was a day late, I could still take a ferry on the 31st and arrive in time for Toshidon that evening. Everything was in place: I contacted friends on the island, reserved train tickets, hotel rooms and even booked my ferry tickets.

The first glitch occurred before we even arrived in California. Briefly: our plane was rerouted to an airport two hours from our destination, we were stranded in the rain, our luggage was lost for days, my wife caught a cold and was advised not to fly, we rebooked our flight (losing hundreds of dollars), made an international connection with seconds to spare, and arrived in Narita to find the trains to Yokohama cancelled. In the end, we finally did make it to my in-laws' house, but not until late in the evening of December 28th, two days later than planned. I would need to leave early the next morning to travel down to the coast of Kagoshima Prefecture where I could catch the ferry the next morning for the island. It had been a pretty hellish trip, but miraculously it looked like I would still make it in time for Toshidon – and with a day to spare.

The next morning, hazy from jetlag, I boarded the bullet train and by eight in the evening, I was in a cheap hotel in Satumasendai. Excitedly, I called my friend Okazaki Takeshi on the island to let him know I would be there the next day. He told me that a rare winter storm was forecast for the afternoon so I should be sure to take the early morning ferry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All names of islanders are pseudonyms.

At 6:30 the next morning I was on my way out the door when my cell phone rang. It was Okazaki calling to let me know the morning ferry had been cancelled. “All right,” I said cheerfully. “How about afternoon?”

“Cancelled.”

“And tomorrow?”

“The storm is supposed to get worse.”

As you have guessed by now, I did not make it to the island that year. I got back on the bullet train and returned to my in-laws’ home for a New Year’s Eve that was pleasant to be sure, but not quite what I had planned.

## Searching for Meaning

Somehow the disappointment of not getting to the island that year was all the more poignant because of the struggles it took to *almost* get there. After a trip fraught with so many difficulties, why was I frustrated at the final step, only twenty-five miles and one short ferry ride from my destination? It was tempting to look for meaning or causality, to interpret these events as signs that might provide insight into past events or guidance for future behavior. Perhaps I was meant to stay on the mainland for some mysterious purpose to be revealed within the next few days? One island friend laughingly suggested that this was clearly a message that I should spend more time with my in-laws.

But of course it is presumptuous to imagine some sort of controlling intelligence causing a winter storm just to prevent *me* from crossing over to the island. In fact, I have been speaking as if I was the only one whose plans were changed. But, of course, the storm affected lives throughout the region in infinite ways: people slipped in the snow, appointments were missed, meetings cancelled, shops closed. And on the island, dozens of people were forced to change their plans. The island has no high school, so teenagers attend schools on the mainland, staying in dorms and other accommodations: how many could not return to the island to visit their families for the holiday? Inversely, other people were stranded on the island. At least one friend of mine was prevented from traveling to the mainland to see his relatives.

The cancellation also affected the performance of Toshidon itself. In his fifties now, Okazaki has become a behind-the-scenes leader, guiding less seasoned performers, but not actually wearing the mask himself. But because of the storm, one of the younger men was stranded on the mainland, so Okazaki had to take over for him. Even then, there were still too few performers of appropriate age, so the young assistant principal of the elementary school wore a mask as well. Not born on the island himself, he participated

with care, wary of speaking in a different dialect and revealing his identity to his own students.

Recently, too, one community on the island has tried to develop its version of Toshidon as a tourist attraction, inviting twenty tourists each year to witness the ritual. But like me, these would-be tourists were stranded on the mainland.<sup>4</sup> And in the few small hotels on the island, there were plenty of empty rooms (and lost revenue). In short, then, this simple storm was a major occurrence for this small community. The cancellation of the ferries for two days at this critical time of year had ramifications for families, for the tourist industry, for commerce, and for ritual.

And yet, none of my friends on the island expressed anything more than a vague sense of disappointment. As one put it, “I was hoping we could drink with you tonight, but I guess we’ll have to wait until next year.” He then added casually that his son had been stranded on the mainland too, so he would have to wait to see him as well. The islanders took it all in stride; a change of plan like this, it seems, was simply not a big deal.

Such an attitude, of course, is necessary in a rural community where livelihoods are at the mercy of weather and other natural conditions. As with fishing people elsewhere in the world, for example, those who work on the island’s small fishing boats determine where to go and what to catch by season and tides and weather. Several times in the past I had arranged to go fishing with my friend Shirai only to arrive at the crack of dawn, to stand with him and look out at the whitecaps and shake our heads. For me it was an experience missed; for Shirai, a day’s income. Inversely I have also visited his house on a clear night to find him unexpectedly away. Just off the coast I could see his boat, and about a dozen others, brightly lit against the black sea, fishing for squid.

It is a given that any fishing or agricultural village is controlled by the vicissitudes of the weather, or rather, that the activities of the day are determined through a *negotiation* with the weather. Seasoned fishing folk know just how much they can push their luck on a swelling sea, and skilled farmers might harvest just before a killing frost. It is only appropriate then that in such an environment, rituals, festivals, and similar traditions are equally subject to improvisation.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the following year (2011), I had the opportunity to meet several of the tourists who had been stranded, and all of them of course had their own stories to tell about the experience.

## The Weight of Tradition

A year earlier, in 2009, I *had* made it to the island successfully. That year had been particularly important because Toshidon had just been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This was a momentous occurrence: a global cultural body had acknowledged this small ritual on a tiny island so distant from Paris and other major cities where UNESCO meetings are held. How would my friends react to this international acknowledgement of their tradition? How would it affect the way they conceive of "heritage"?

What I discovered that year was that most people were excited about the designation but also wary of its ramifications. They adamantly resisted the possibility that such outside recognition would cause their tradition to become crystallized. Toshidon was a ritual for disciplining children, they maintained, and if there were no children on the island, then Toshidon would cease to exist. As the population of children on the island has decreased precipitously in recent years, the possibility of there being no children of appropriate age in the near future is a very real possibility.

Furthermore, I was told, Toshidon had never had fixed rules for clothing and behavior anyway; it was a flexible ad hoc process, an improvisational "happening" that changed by necessity every year. I am generalizing here, but this was the attitude of almost everybody I spoke with – be they farmers or fishers, government employees, the postmaster, ferryboat operators, politicians, or construction workers.

But there was one dissenting opinion.

When I left the island that year, at the dawn of 2010, I sat on the ferry next to a man I had never met before. The man, who I will call Yamaguchi, was in his early fifties but looked younger; he was short and tightly muscled, with a smooth tanned face. When I told him I was researching Toshidon, he stated sharply, "I have something to say." He explained that he was from the island but had lived for years on the mainland, raising his family and working various jobs. He told me he did not like the attention Toshidon was starting to get from the media. He believed the tradition had been corrupted in recent years. He was afraid it would become a spectacle and lose its meaning. He said the people in the village office, and those who had come to see me off when I boarded the ferry, didn't know a thing about Toshidon. Repeatedly, in his criticisms, he invoked a word that struck me as somewhat odd: *karui* or light. He told me that the people currently involved with Toshidon are *light*, the implication being that they take things *lightly*, that their knowledge is *light*, and that they are therefore making the tradition *light*.



It was a pretty rough ferry ride, in part because of a choppy sea, but mainly because of Yamaguchi's criticisms. When we arrived, Yamaguchi gave me a lift to the train station, and I promised him I would think about what he had said.

And I have. Particularly the following year, after my failed attempt to get to the island, the notion of *lightness* began to take on a profundity I suspect Yamaguchi had not intended. When I realized I wasn't going to make it to the island, a heaviness washed over me. Events took on gravity; not only would I miss Toshidon, but there seemed some weighty reason for having traveled so far only to be denied the chance. And yet, when I spoke with Okazaki, when I spoke with Shirai, they laughed it off. These things happen. They took the whole thing *lightly*.

And that is exactly the point. Yamaguchi was right: my friends on the island, the people who live with Toshidon, do take their tradition lightly, because it is only through this lightness of attitude that Toshidon retains flexibility through the capriciousness of weather and unforeseen circumstances. If tradition is too heavy, tradition bearers cannot sustain it. But if they hold onto it lightly, lift it with grace and agility, the sort of delicate touch that allows for play and movement and tactical adjustment to circumstances, then there is always next year. Because of course, as folklorists have long known, any tradition, any sense of heritage, is predicated as much on the belief in continuity with the past and the future, as it is with meaning in the present.

My failed ethnography had actually turned into a very productive experience. By *not* making it to the island, I had learned a great deal about how the islanders apprehend the world and consider their activities within it. And this notion of lightness has become for me a touchstone for accessing the way people sustain their heritage. I fancy it a kind of intangible lightness: not measurable or quantifiable, but a sort of intuition or skill like walking a tightrope, an ability to respond to the subtlest of changes. This is, not surprisingly, the very same kind of sensitivity and flexibility that allows a fishing or agricultural community to survive through times of storm or drought or other unpredictable circumstances. Every plan is always necessarily only *for now*. Heritage floats. I began pondering these ideas further, and writing about this failed-but-therefore-successful ethnographic experience.

## Infrastructures

But then, one morning in March 2011, I woke up in my Indiana home to news of the Tohoku earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear catastrophe. My friends on the island, safely ensconced in the southwest corner of Japan, were far from the epicenter. I knew they were safe. And yet, as I stared at the images streaming

across my computer screen, I could not help but think of them. I watched and I read about how people in small communities – places like Kesennuma, Rikuzentakata, Ishinomaki – were coping, or trying to cope. And I imagined how the small community I know best, Shimo-Koshikijima, might deal with a similar situation.

Several weeks after the earthquake I also began to wonder what happens to rituals and festivals and similar activities in such devastating circumstances. If tradition and heritage, whether from an emic or an etic perspective, presume continuity between past, present, and future, what happens when the festival site has been wiped from the face of the land? What happens to a ritual for safe waters and a good catch, for example, when there is no longer a port, no longer any fishing boats, and the families that once manned them are dead? At times like this, does heritage become a frivolous luxury of a lost, happier world?

A picture in the *New Yorker* showed a flattened wasteland that was once Minami-Sanriku in Miyagi Prefecture. The caption read: “When the tsunami receded, some of the towns in a region that traced its history to the seventh century had ceased to exist in visible form” (*New Yorker*, 2011, 80 f.).<sup>5</sup> In *visible form*. Does the heritage of a people or community have to be expressed through visible form? Is intangible heritage meaningless when concerns are tangible ones like food and shelter?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But I wonder if it isn't exactly at that terrible moment when visible forms of heritage like ritual and festival seem irrelevant that the *intangible* meaning of the concept emerges. In the weeks and months after March 11, the Japanese were noted for their resilience, for the orderly way they coped with personal and national tragedy. I am by no means suggesting any sort of unique Japanese resiliency, but it is evident that, at least in some communities, there was already in place a long and well-rehearsed set of human relationships – a command structure, as it were – that transcended even the loss of individual community members.

Less than two weeks after the disaster, a newspaper article on the hamlet of Hadenya in the Minami-Sanriku area explained that “the colossal wave that swept away this tiny fishing hamlet also washed out nearby bridges, phone lines and cellphone service, leaving survivors shivering and dazed and completely cut off at a hilltop community center.” Within days, however, despite the destruction of the technological and civic infrastructure, the villagers had created a governing body and a clinic, and were systematically dividing up daily tasks such as finding fuel and preparing meals. When asked how all this was possible under such ex-

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<sup>5</sup> The photos follow a “Letter from Japan” by Evan Osnos, entitled “Aftershocks: A Nation Bears the Unbearable” (*New Yorker*, 21 March 2011, 70–79).

treme circumstances, one of the leaders, Abe Osamu, explained that they “found it easy to cooperate because they had organized themselves to hold the village’s religious festivals” (Fackler 2011). In other words, they already had in place the necessary structure of command, relationships and cooperative experiences that made it possible for them to quickly and effectively respond to an unthinkable situation. Despite the fact that the tangible infrastructure of the community was literally washed away, the intangible infrastructure still held.

Perhaps I am extrapolating too broadly from this limited example – and certainly extended and varied fieldwork would be necessary to make an empirically valid point. Nor do I want to wax Utopic or overly optimistic; more than six years later, Hadenya, like so many other places devastated by the tragedy, is certainly still in the midst of a long struggle. But I would suggest that we see here heritage in practice, that is, heritage as a structure of leadership and responsibility. And at the same time, more profoundly, we also see the deeper role heritage plays in the lives of community residents. It provides, in essence, an *infrastructure of caring*: a template for working together that may normally be expressed through the performance of a given ritual or event but can also be mobilized, in times of need, for organizing a shelter for survivors. Of such spontaneously organized groups, the mayor of Minami-Sanriku, Sato Jin, commented, “They are like extended families... They provide support and comfort” (quoted in Fackler 2011).

I use the word “infrastructure” here very intentionally because it reminds us that below what we see or experience, there are often taken-for-granted ways of interacting and operating that inform the structure of any community. “Good infrastructure is by definition invisible,” explain Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star. It is “part of the background for other kinds of work.” In its everyday sense, then, infrastructure is “something that other things ‘run on,’ things that are substrate to events and movements” (Lampland and Star 2009, 17). In my own research on Toshidon for example, I have explored how the ritual event – the twenty minutes a year in which the demon-deity creatures appear in the household – is supported by an infrastructure of shared understandings, relationships, hierarchies, and stories told by parents to their children. There is an invisible substrate that exists all year round and makes possible the visible New Year’s Eve event. The ritual as it plays out on that single evening is only a superstructure, the tip of the iceberg, as it were, an above-the-surface projection of an unseen support system.

In the case of Hadenya, the particular event – the “religious festival” – may have been (temporarily?) made meaningless by the disaster, but the infrastructure remained in place, this time supporting the creation of a temporary government and a clinic and an effective division of labor, all in the interest of survival. The very real system of human connections, of years of communication

and working together in festivals and community events, now allows a community to organize itself effectively and efficiently in an evacuation center during a catastrophe. If heritage is “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369), in certain circumstances such “cultural production” is not commodifiable, not appropriate for exhibition, not even visible. But it saves lives.

Again, I am wary of being too optimistic here. Infrastructures are built through human relations, and human relations are inflected with the faults and shortsightedness and biases of any society and the specific individuals who constitute it. Rural Japanese communities are certainly not immune to discrimination and intolerance. Historical hierarchies and local prejudices are often reflected in the performance of rituals and festivals, and may also be reflected in the emergency superstructure created after a catastrophe. My point here is to suggest that the existence of active, living traditions within a community, of this intangible thing called cultural heritage, simply means that there is already an infrastructure on which a superstructure of support can be built in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

## Subject to Change

In Hadenya, the superstructural artifact that “runs” on the infrastructure was the practical systems of governance, health care, and labor that were constructed after evacuation. We might say that the artifact of the “tradition” itself was replaced completely by a temporary set of institutions that were much more relevant to the situation at hand. In a sense, this is a purely instrumental use of the infrastructure of caring that survived the cataclysm.

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<sup>6</sup> In a contrasting case in the United States, sisters Caitria and Morgan O'Neill have discussed their own experience of a tornado in their hometown of Monson, Massachusetts, and the difficulties they faced because of a lack of infrastructure: “During a painful period, our community learned how to manage volunteers and donations, track data, apply for grants and request aid through official channels. We bumbled through the early days, doing things wrong and wasting time. Eventually a system emerged, coordinated largely by the First Church of Monson and a few dedicated local volunteers. But why did we have to build that system on our own? Though we were prepared to survive the storm, why hadn't someone prepared us for recovery?” (O'Neill, Caitria: *How Communities Bounce Back from Disaster*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/02/opinion/oneill-disaster-recovery/index.html>; accessed 11 November 2016). The sisters' experience of creating “a functional infrastructure for recovery” inspired them to found Recover.org, which they call “the idealization of the infrastructure they built: a clean, easy-to-use recovery software framework that can be deployed before a disaster to prepare communities” (see “Born from Disaster”. <https://recovers.org/about>; accessed 11 November 2016).

But even while communities were mobilizing their infrastructures for such practical and explicitly care-giving purposes, many communities made an express point of also continuing to perform their festivals and traditions within the context of post-disaster recovery. Perhaps the very act of running something on the infrastructure can itself help energize the community and perpetuate the human relations that constitute it. A quick perusal of newspaper reports that appeared in the weeks and months after 3.11 in fact reveals a fierce determination that “celebrations” should persist despite – or because of – the adversity of the situation. At first glance such persistence might seem almost a willful denial of the depth of the tragedy, but clearly there is something more going on here.<sup>7</sup> Less than a month after the disaster, for example, mayors from three cities in Tohoku, worried about “a national mood of self-restraint,” announced that they would proceed with their summer festivals because they “wanted to project the vitality of the Tohoku region” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 b). If we think of this in terms of narrative, we are in a sense watching the characters hijack the story, assuming agency in their own tale to create a narrative they want to share with others.

In the city of Morioka, it was announced that Morioka Sansa-Odori, a major summer festival, would be held as usual, although there would be certain modifications: the annual “Miss Sansa-Odori Contest” would not be open to the public and, because of energy shortages, the time of the parade would be adjusted based on the availability of electricity; moreover electrical generators would be prepared (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 c).<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the festivals here are large city events and their continued production was as much a way to encourage a return of tourism as it was to provide residents a sense of continuity with the past and hope for normalcy in the future. But what I want to stress here is the attitude of lightness with which leaders and residents approached their heritage, their willingness to modify or reinvent tradition to accommodate the needs of a community in crisis.

Even more striking, however, is the persistence of festival production within smaller, tighter communities, where infrastructure was engaged for the residents alone. In this context, the very performance of tradition in the face of diversity becomes both a sign of, and a catalyst for, community vitality. If the residents are creating their own narrative here, it is one that they tell themselves *for* themselves. On April 24, only six weeks after the catastrophe, for example, the residents of Kamaishi City in Iwate Prefecture joined together to perform a “tiger dance” (*tora-mai*) traditionally enacted as a prayer for safety at sea. Some twenty group members played drums and danced. Over half of these participants had lost

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<sup>7</sup> For one detailed example after another earthquake, see Suga Yutaka’s article in this issue.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the Morioka sansa odori festival, see <http://www.sansaodori.jp/>.

their homes in the tsunami, and two group members had been killed. The remaining members had struggled over whether it was appropriate to perform so soon after the tragedy but eventually determined that their performance “would give strength to the citizens.” Watching at the evacuation center, one woman said, “Even through all this, they have come.” Another said, “It makes me cry” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 d). The performance itself articulates a story of revitalization and strength, and acts, in a sense, as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy or speech act – its very telling makes the story true, and changes the reality of the situation.

In May of 2011, more than half the residents of the Kugunari-hama district in Ishinomaki City (Miyagi Prefecture) were still living in evacuation centers. Most homes had been washed away; four people were dead; one was still missing. When time came for the spring festival [*matsuri*], some residents wondered if it was really appropriate. But sixty-three year old Numakura Keiichi argued, “I want to have a festival to pray for recovery.” He enlisted other local residents and the priest of the shrine and they decided to go ahead. Although the main building of the shrine itself was intact, the *torii* gate had been washed away and the area was littered with debris; they cleared it away with heavy machinery, and on May 3rd over one hundred people gathered for the festival. “It has been a long time since we saw cheerful faces,” said one participant (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 e).

And one more powerful example – this one from the Ōishi district of Rikuzen-Takata City in Iwate Prefecture. The district had been devastated: of 160 households, only 40 remained; of 350 residents, 80 were still missing. Yet, on March 23, only twelve days after the catastrophe, residents performed their local tiger dance. In front of the once-submerged community center, on a landscape littered with upside-down fire trucks and the remains of destroyed homes, they danced wildly with glimmering black masks and “black and yellow striped cloth waving this way and that.” The dance, as the newspaper points out, was “originally” a custom in which the dancers would go from house to house ritualistically exorcising bad fortune on the “little New Year holiday” (*koshōgatsu*), around January 15. Here then, on a different date and in a different location, the existing infrastructure and knowhow were deployed to create a performance with a different (or perhaps eerily similar) function and narrative. “Just being at the evacuation center makes you depressed,” explained Satō Minoru, one of the dancers. “We cannot let our protective deity (*mamori-gami*) sleep beneath the wreckage” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 a).

Judging from this sampling of newspaper articles, it seems that in the weeks immediately following the catastrophe, as one reporter observed, “the traditions and beliefs of Tohoku have become a form of spiritual support for the victims” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 a). Moreover, in many cases the need to preserve and give new life to tradition functioned to hold the fabric of the community together. In

the words of a seventy-five year old Ōishi woman who was working with younger residents to reconstruct items used in a summer festival: “So much has been washed away. I want to make sure the community bonds (*kizuna*) still remain” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 a).

I don’t want to extrapolate too much from this very limited and anecdotal material.<sup>9</sup> To a large degree, such newspaper articles reveal as much about the media spin and the hopes of readers watching from a distance as they do about the on-the-ground sentiments of people struggling to survive. Media reports like this tend to be too neat, to affirm too easily the dominant narrative of a hopeful portrayal of resistance, revitalization and triumph.<sup>10</sup> Years after the earthquake and tsunami, life in affected areas is anything but “normal.” The dead and missing are not forgotten; businesses have yet to recover; many residents have not been able to return home; others have moved to other parts of the country, other communities, where they are struggling to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. And the unabated, slow-motion disaster that is the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant has continued to play out tragically against the bumbling excuses of the Tokyo Electric Power Company and the criminal hypocrisies of the Japanese government.

But my point is not a political one nor an essentialist argument for the resilience of the Japanese spirit – or even, for that matter, the resilience of the human spirit. Rather, I simply want to observe that, even in the depths of unimaginable loss, some value can be squeezed from this thing scholars call “heritage.” On the one hand, it provides a sense of continuity, a linking of the present with the past and with the desire at least to persist into the future. Soon after the disaster, a sixty-six year old carpenter in Ōishi began fixing the accouterments for the local Tanabata festival. “Even after ten years, I don’t think we will be able to perform our festival,” he explained to a reporter. “But if we [remake everything] little by little, the festival will be revived by the time of my grandchildren or great grandchildren” (*Asahi shinbun* 2011 a).

On the other hand, the existence of traditions within a given community also, as I have suggested, means that a set of relationships and operational practices are already in place. Such an infrastructure, of course, differs from community to

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**9** Of course, fieldwork with effected people would certainly reveal more nuanced information and critical details. But in part because of the onslaught of researchers into the disaster areas, as documented by Suga in this issue, I am hesitant myself to intrude into communities where I have no longstanding relationship. My point rather is that from observing even from a distance, we can learn to better understand the communities with which we do have close connections.

**10** For an insightful critique of such media-controlled dominant narratives in the case of Hurricane Katrina, see Kate Parker Horigan’s article in the current volume. See also Amy Shuman’s work on empathy, in this issue and elsewhere, for insight into questions of distance.



community, but it is the thing that makes the performance of the tradition run smoothly every year. And it is also the thing that, as in Hadenya, kicks in when a festival or other event is the last thing on the minds of the residents.

But what I most want to stress here is that, despite the persistence of this infrastructure and despite the desire for the persistence of tradition itself, flexibility and willingness to change are key to actual practice. I have loosely invoked the notion of storytelling to suggest the way in which community members take command of their own stories in order to create a narrative that can inspire survival and recovery. To push the metaphor even further, we might think of infrastructure itself as a sort of tale type, providing a foundation on which a storyteller builds a narrative. And of course skilled storytellers are characterized by their flexibility and ability to improvise; the infrastructure of heritage allows residents to build their own stories through ritual and celebration, when words may not suffice. Whether it is the performance of a tiger dance in a different place and at a different time, or the decision to cancel the “Miss Sansa-Odori Contest,” tradition is characterized by a light touch: flexibility, improvisation, and a willingness to negotiate with current realities. When those current realities are of devastation, then flexibility may entail extreme change such as creating an evacuation center: a practical, life-giving facility that is as much a part of heritage as any festival or ritual dance.

## Bearable Lightness

To return now to my own tale of failed ethnography with which I began, I hesitate to compare one of the most devastating natural disasters in history to a simple snowstorm that caused a ferry cancelation, but in a strange way there is a connection between the idea that heritage is something to be taken lightly and the flexibility necessary to survive these extreme conditions. My friends in Shimo-Koshikijima accommodated changing circumstances with grace. Toshidon, as several islanders have explained to me, is nothing more than a metaphor, an articulation of the community’s collective care for its members. The capriciousness of the weather shifted their procedures that year, slightly altered the metaphor, but did not fundamentally lessen its meaning and importance to the islanders, nor damage the infrastructure upon which it runs.

Through my own engagement with this one ritual I can begin to imagine the complex role of heritage and its bearers in the communities affected by the catastrophe of 3.11. The thing we call intangible cultural heritage is real and meaningful but most importantly it is light – it *must* be light – because it is carried, from one year to the next despite, and sometimes because of unforeseeable



occurrences. In the best of times heritage may seem unsustainably light, unbearably light, but in the worst of times it can bear people aloft.

## Coda

I began this essay by stressing the geographical distance between the site where the terrible events of 3.11 occurred and the island of Shimo-Koshikijima where Toshidon is performed. Despite that distance, my personal experiences with the island community made it possible for me to place 3.11 into a somewhat familiar context and imagine how my own friends might cope with a similar situation. Ultimately, though, my ruminations remain only theoretical – a sort of imagined, intellectual effort at empathy, of transcending difference both geographical and experiential. But given my stress on distance, ironically I was recently reminded of the very real connections between people and places, and of the inescapable interconnectedness of events, in a way that brought the events of 3.11 a little closer to the island I know so well. On August 11, 2015, the Kyushu Electric Power Company restarted one of its nuclear reactors – the first reactor to go on line in Japan since the Fukushima disaster, after which all reactors in the country were shut down. That first reactor is at the Sendai Nuclear Power Plant, on the coast of Kagoshima Prefecture in the city of Satsumasendai – the municipality in which Shimo-Koshikijima is located. My friends on the island live only about thirty miles away.

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